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THE LESSONS OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

BY

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THE LESSONS OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR.

The greatest event in the history of the United States after the war of the Revolution was the war of 1861. The first gained independence, the second secured freedom and union. The war of the Revolution delivered us from subjection to a foreign power, but it did not make us free. North and South were both enslaved by slavery. North and South were both delivered from slavery by the Civil War. The boon was a great one to the Northern States, which had been compelled for years to stifle their noblest convictions and quench their purest aspirations by the command of the slave power. But the yoke was heavier on the South itself than on the North, and the deliverance greater, which appears from the satisfaction the whole South feels to-day for its emancipation from the institution of negro slavery. Slavery oppressed the North like a nightmare, but it crushed the South with its intolerable weight. It was a dreadful evil to the slaves; it was, perhaps, yet more dreadful to the slaveholders. No wonder, then, that the South rejoices at its emancipation.

Twenty years ago, slavery was defended by the whole South as right in itself, good for slaves and masters, and the only secure foundation for republican freedom. The

Southern churches declared it to be a Christian institution, and some Northern divines wrote and preached sermons in its defence. Now, none so poor as to do it reverence. Public opinion on this question has gone from nadir to zenith. Mr. Edward Atkinson told me that he was conversing in South Carolina with two grandsons of John C. Calhoun, and that he asked them how many people at the South would like to have slavery back. "Not one in a thousand," said one of them. "Not one in a hundred thousand," cried the other. "But what would your grandfather say if he heard this?" asked Atkinson. "If our grandfather were alive he would say the same thing," was their answer.

The Civil War delivered us from slavery and its corruptions, and made us for the first time a really free people, able to read without a blush the grand deliverances of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." These words are no longer "glittering generalities," they are solid facts.

The great Civil War also made us for the first time a truly united people. It gave not only freedom, but union. Before, there was outward union, but internal strife. Since slavery was abolished these States have become truly one. We are now one in our institutions, language, interests, convictions, sympathies, and purposes. To the human reason there seems to be no root of bitterness which can again spring up to divide us. Each State, independent as regards its own affairs, is bound to the

rest by such numerous ties of interest and brotherhood that we need no standing armies to defend us against each other at home, no mighty navies to carry on wars abroad. We are strong enough and peaceful enough to dispense with both. We need a small army for police purposes, and few ships for shore defence, and that is all.

Such have been the great results of the Civil War—a fierce fever which expelled the latent elements of disease, leaving us exhausted for a time, but with a career of healthy development before us. And on Decoration Day we may well gratefully remember the graves of our heroes, and lay flowers on them as a fitting tribute to the courage and faith which will be forever fragrant and forever beautiful. These flowers, annually renewed, are more perennial than monuments of marble. The marble we leave to take care of itself, but the flowers fade and must be renewed; and every year they revive in our hearts the loving recollection of what this grand devotion has been for us. Never let it be forgotten. As the years pass, let this sacred memory be more deeply enshrined in our hearts. Wherever these martyrs lie, in Northern cemeteries, amid the forests of Central Virginia, on the hills of Northern Georgia, they will sanctify the land.

"The waters murmur with their name,
The woods are peopled with their fame;
The silent pillar, lone and gray,
Claims kindred with their sacred clay.
Their memory wraps the dusky mountain,
Their spirit sparkles in the fountain.
The meanest rill, the mightiest river,
Rolls mingling with their fame forever."

So many years have now passed since the war, that a new generation has grown up, which scarcely remembers it, and I take this occasion when Decoration Day falls on Sunday to speak of some of the important lessons of that terrible conflict, lessons which ought never to be forgotten.

1. The first lesson is Faith in the Power of Free Institutions.

Down to the time of the Civil War the permanence of our institutions was disbelieved by many thinkers in Europe, and doubted by some at home. "A republic may hold together," they said, "when it is small and weak, but as it grows larger it will fall apart by its own weight. Each section will have its own interests, and these will bring about division. The vast distances which separate the Eastern, Southern, and Western States will make continued union impossible. What common interest can exist between Maine and Texas, between Massachusetts and Oregon?" Thus spoke old experience, pretending to something of prophetic strain. And many more distrusted free institutions; were afraid of the rule of a majority; thought public opinion an unsafe guide, and considered that a strong government in the hands of the few was safer.

The war came and confuted these theories. Then was seen the good sense which freedom brings to the mind, and the might that slumbers in a freeman's arm. No power on earth but that of free institutions could have conquered such a formidable insurrection as that of 1861. Napoleon, at the apex of his power, could not have called out in such a brief space the mighty armies which gave themselves voluntarily to save the nation. No one knew—we did

not know ourselves—the love of country which was in the hearts of the people. We thought patriotism dead, destroyed by the mean desire of gain, by the selfishness of politicians and the strife of parties, by indifference to all public interests and absorption in private pursuits. A gun was fired at Fort Sumter, and the whole North arose, like a strong man from his sleep. The Northern Democrats, who had been supposed the faithful allies of slavery, snapped the chains of party as Samson broke the ropes with which the Philistines had bound him. More than two millions of Northern men entered the service during the war—Democrats, Whigs, and Republicans—Americans by birth, Germans, English, Irish. The rich gave of their wealth, the poor of their poverty. It was *their* country, the government was their own; they understood its value. They had been educated in free schools, taught the laws of duty in free churches, and they were ready to give all they had and were to save the land and its institutions.

Whenever, therefore, we hear our republican freedom disparaged, the worth of self-government questioned, let us remember how they stood the test in that terrible trial; how, when the crisis came, it was found that patriotism was not dead, and that men were as ready to give their lives and their fortunes for their land as the Greeks at Marathon or the Swiss at Morat. After the Civil War an entire change took place in the opinion of the world in regard to the stability of free government; and to-day we find the class of English statesmen who used to predict our speedy downfall, asking if they may not usefully adopt some of our methods in the English constitution. They find a conservative element in our Senate, and our Presi-

dent, superior to that of the House of Lords and the English monarchy.

2. The next lesson of the war is Faith in Human Nature. There have been worldly cynics and theological cynics who have joined forces in depreciating human nature. Both make selfishness the mainspring and the motor force of man's conduct. The events of the great war were a confutation of this poor theory. A great enthusiasm of devotion took possession of the land. Some people continued to act meanly and selfishly, but the great majority were ready to bear witness to their convictions by sacrifice of ease, of wealth, of time, of personal safety. Then came the Sanitary Commission and the Christian Commission—great outpourings of the people's heart to carry comfort and aid to the soldiers. The rumor of a battle brought one Sunday to Boston hundreds of boxes of clothing, food, cordials, medicines, which were piled along the sidewalks opposite the Tremont House. Great fairs were held for the Sanitary Commission, one of which produced more than a million dollars. At the end of the war it was found that the people had given through the Sanitary Commission more than fifteen millions of dollars in supplies and more than five millions in money.

Men sacrificed not only their wealth, but their tastes and prejudices to the common cause. I was in Governor Andrew's room on the 19th of April, 1861, when the news was coming by telegraph of the attack on our troops in Baltimore. While I was there Edward Everett came in. He had been nominated for Vice-President of the United States by the Union Whigs in Baltimore in opposition to the Republicans who nominated Lincoln. But, forgetting

this party hostility, he said: "I have come, Governor Andrew, to offer you my services in any way in which you can make use of them." Another gentleman, a friend and classmate of mine, and no Republican, came in on the same day, and handed his check for $10,000 to Governor Andrew, to be used as he thought best. It was like the Day of Pentecost, when all heard each other speaking in the same tongue. One language was uttered by all—the language of patriotism. Republicans and Democrats, Whigs and Abolitionists, Conservatives and Come-outers, stood side by side for the Union. Young men, hard-handed sons of toil, or those who had been thought only "darlings" of fashion went together to fight and die for the mother-land.

> "So nigh is grandeur to our dust,
> So near is God to man;
> When duty whispers low, 'Thou must,'
> The youth replies, 'I can.'"

Let us, then, think more highly of human nature than we are taught by mere worldly wisdom. "The times are bad," says Körner, "but there are yet noble souls. Common clay may tend to its mother earth, but all nobleness moves heavenward." Easy hours of enjoyment may make men seem frivolous; but when the great day of trial comes the depths are broken up, and we see that out of those depths men can still cry to God, and give themselves nobly to his work.

3. The third lesson of the great war is Faith in Providence.

After the war had been going on some time, my friend Dr. Samuel Cabot said to me, "It does not now require

faith to believe in Providence; it only needs common sense."

How many things which seemed to us at the time disasters turned out at last to be blessings. The madness of the South, which precipitated the war, appeared a great evil; but if the Secessionists had not attacked our forts, seized our arsenals, made prisoners of our troops; if they had only practised "passive resistance," and merely refused to send members to Congress or to co-operate in the Union, we must have at last consented to a division of the Union, and the continuance of slavery. But God, by the working of those wise laws which we call Providence, blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, as he did the heart of Pharaoh, and they refused all the compromises we offered, fired at the National flag, seized United States forts and ships, and made it impossible for the North not to resist and not to be united. On the 27th of December, 1860, Charles Francis Adams, a leading Republican, offered in the House Committee at Washington a resolution, "that it is expedient to propose an amendment to the Constitution that no future amendments of it in regard to slavery shall be made, unless proposed by a slave State and ratified by all the States." The South refused this offer, for it was determined to secede. Fortunate for us that it did refuse, in its judicial blindness, for thus on the 31st of January, 1865, four years after, Congress was able to adopt an amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery forever. Before the war the North was ready to go all lengths for peace, to offer every possible compromise; but the Southern leaders, blinded by false hopes, hurried their States into secession and

revolution, and so prepared the way for a solid Union founded at last on freedom and on common interests.

Another series of events which were very hard to bear were the Southern victories at the beginning of the war. I recollect well the deep gloom which fell over this community when the news came of our first defeat at Bull Run. It seemed too much to endure. Our young men had gone to the war, not from excitement, not from any ambitious desire, but with sad earnestness of conviction, from a deep sense of duty. The North had sent its bravest and best, and the first result was this sad defeat. We did not know then that this very defeat would rouse the whole nation. We did not know the stern determination of the North, which repeated disasters only made more determined. Nor did we see that early victories on our side might have resulted in another peace which was not peace; in new compromises with slavery. Still less did we see that defeat at first would make our final success complete. I do not think it has been often remarked that if we had gained the first victories; if at the beginning of the war we had overrun Virginia and taken Richmond, the Southern troops, unwilling to submit, might have fallen back among their mountains and carried on an interminable guerilla conflict. And in such a war we might never have conquered them. Napoleon in Spain, with three hundred thousand veteran troops, under his best marshals, was unable to put down the guerilla resistance in the mountains. But because the South succeeded at first, and because it had at the beginning better commanders than we, it put all its troops, and every man that could be found, into its armies; and when Lee surrendered

to Grant, and Johnston to Sherman, there were no Southern troops left to carry on further resistance; and thus a guerilla war became impossible.

The South had its successes at the beginning; we had ours at the end. They were a more military people, accustomed to command slaves and be always ready to defend themselves. Our people were peaceful, hating war; but they had the determined purpose developed by our free schools, and habits of persistency learned in our thousand industries, and God gave us the leaders we needed. If there ever was a providential chief, it was Abraham Lincoln. Massachusetts did not wish for him at first; we wished for Seward. But what a misfortune the election of Seward instead of Lincoln would have been! In Lincoln God gave us a man who was wise, was calm, was conservative enough to satisfy the conservatives, progressive enough to content the radicals. He saw the proportions of things; the magnitude of the contest; the need of uniting the whole North, and keeping it united; of keeping the border States out of disunion; of moving forward cautiously, but with determination. He had the sagacious insight which could understand character, and make the best use of men unlike himself and unlike each other. How different were Seward and Stanton, Sumner and Grant, Halleck, Sherman, Chase! But Lincoln knew how to use them all; he kept each at work where he could do the most good. Lincoln never allowed any personal motive or any wounded feeling to sway his calm judgment. He gave high positions to men whom he knew to be opposing him, because he saw that they would be useful. As the war went on, he took the lead more and

more, yet giving full liberty to his commanders. He was always at hand with his keen judgment, his clear insight, advising with Grant and Stanton and Sumner and Seward, but leaving them full freedom of action. Without parade or profession, he was a deeply religious man;—outwardly careless and uncouth, he was a man of innate refinement; careless of speech, he could rise to the highest eloquence; claiming no deference, without assumption, not caring for the appearance of power, he had beneath his good-nature a hand of iron. As the years pass he rises continually to a higher position in the world's esteem, and will have his place in history with Alfred and William of Orange, with the founders and restorers of states, as the liberator of a race and the savior of a nation.

Fortunate, too, were we in Massachusetts, with a Governor like John Andrew; a man who combined such wisdom, integrity, kindness of heart, unflinching courage, power of work and endurance, and capability of influencing others. He, too, was a providential man, sent to us in our need, a tower of strength, a pilot to weather the storm. He and Charles Sumner and a multitude of others held aloft the proud banner of Massachusetts with the old words of Sidney on its shield; seeking placid rest by its sword under liberty.

Thank God, its sword is sheathed. Thank God for the prospect of a peace which shall endure because founded on justice and freedom. Thank God that the men of this generation know nothing of war except when we who are older tell them of their fathers' courage and trials. Thank God for *real* union between North and South, East and West. From the tossing surges of the Atlantic to the

murmur of the far Pacific; from the lakes, covered with white sails and hurrying steamers, to the waters which wash the shores of Texas, all is peace and union, as if these seas had never heard the roar of angry cannon, nor seen the grim forms of the blockading fleets. How grateful should we be to God for this great deliverance! How thankful to the power who guides us through ways we know not of to an end of blessing. In the words of our poet, which are never outworn, we still say,

"Bow down, dear Land, for thou hast found release!
Thy God, in these distempered days,
Hath taught thee the sure wisdom of his ways,
And through thine enemies hath wrought thy peace."